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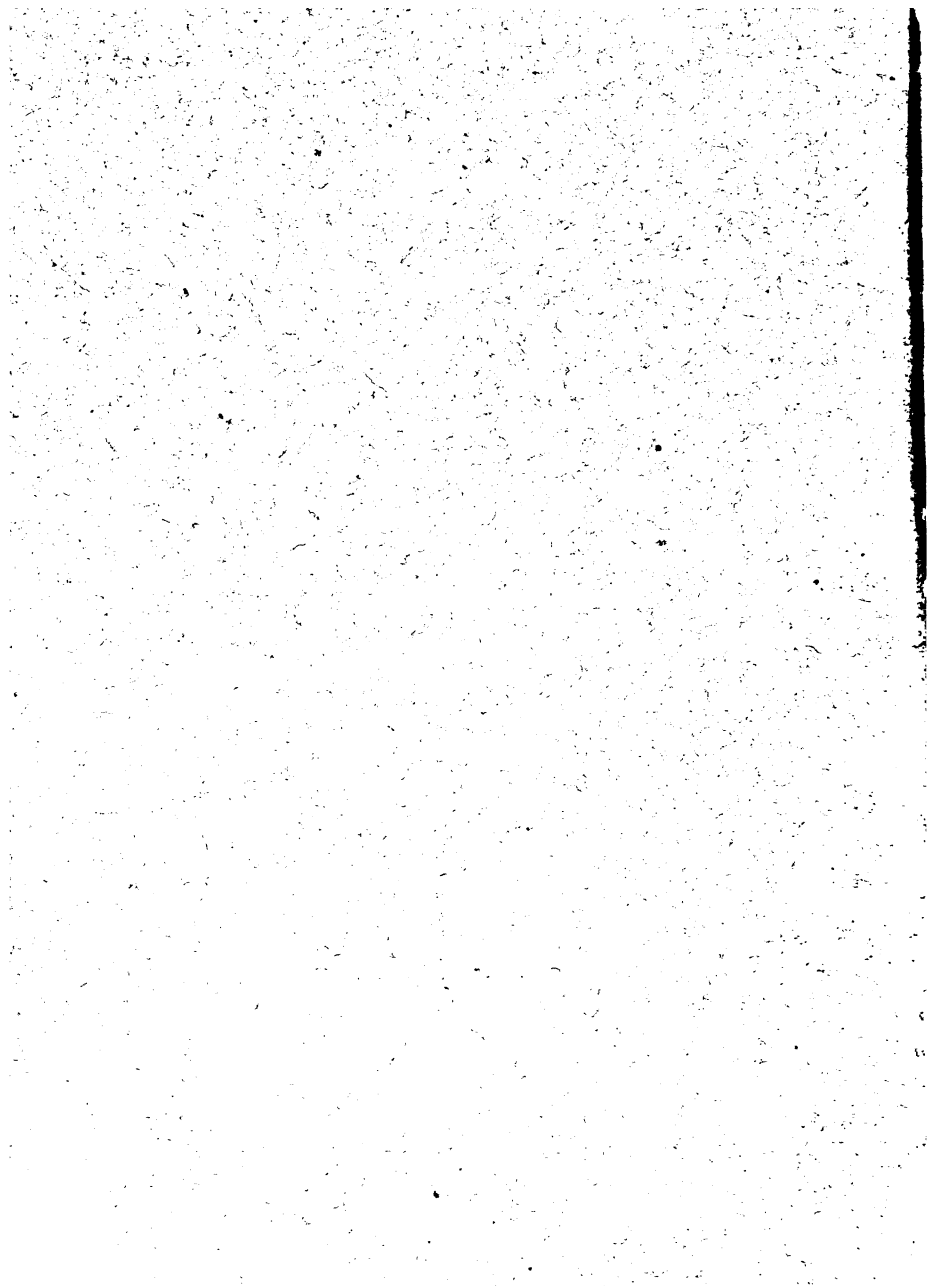
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A COMMON SENSE VIEW
OF THE
WESTMINSTER CONFESSION

BY
JOHN SHIRLEY WARD

PRICE TWENTY-FIVE CENTS

A COMMON SENSE VIEW
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BY
JOHN SHIRLEY WARD
AN ELDER IN
IMMANUEL PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
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In entering on an analysis of some of the doctrinal features of the Westminster Confession, we would be both morally and intellectually unfit to touch it, did we not feel the gravity of such an effort. To trample upon the long established theories and prejudices of a deeply religious body—to dispel the illusions of our childhood by showing that after all some of our “idols” are only clay—to show that the Shekinah, which we have been taught to believe hangs around and glorifies the temple of our religious creed, is, perhaps, only a light kindled by the resplendent genius of St. Augustine and Calvin, is, to say the least, an unpleasant duty.

In this discussion, we only propose to look at the questions as presented in The Confession, from the standpoint of common sense; to view them as well educated people of to-day look at them, without regard to any biblical authority for the same. We will here admit that no theory, theological or political, which is repugnant to common sense or our common ideas of human justice, will ever be acceptable to intelligent people.

To make ourselves understood, we assert that all of God's demands upon man are reasonable and just and that the intelligent mind is not rebelling against God's plan of salvation, but against human deductions, as to what that plan is. We now propose to look at some of the propositions embodied in The Westminster Confession from purely a “common sense” point of view—leaving the whole question of its correctness from a biblical point of view to be discussed at some future time.

Chapter III of the Confession starts out with the assertion that "God from all eternity did, by the most wise and holy counsel of his own will, freely and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass." This is a positive assertion that all things that have come to pass are ordained of God and that practically the world is a mere automaton or machine to register the decrees of God. The men of the Westminster, seeing, as they must have seen, that the doctrine of God's "ordination of whatever comes to pass" would make God responsible for the introduction of sin into the world, and that such a doctrine would necessarily rebound against the whole theory of man's free agency, modified it by these *hedging* and *defensive* words, "yet, so as thereby neither is God the author of sin," and then, to explain away the fatalistic position into which God's ordination has placed man; they add, "Nor is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established."

Out of this theory is developed the idea which lies at the basis of the Westminster Confession, that while "God knows what may or can come to pass upon all supposed conditions, yet hath he not decreed anything *because he foresaw it as future*."

It is well to admit that there are two theories of election: One is, "That God, without foresight of good deeds, or faith, or compliance with the terms offered by the Gospel, but simply to show his supreme sovereignty, and to add to the 'praise of His glorious grace,' selected certain persons to be saved, and 'passed by' certain persons to be lost. Under this decree, the atonement of Christ was a part of the decree and was simply the means by which this decree was to be

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worked out, as under this idea the Atonement was *only* made for those who had been ordained to be saved, and the Holy Spirit was only given to those for whom an atonement had been made. This theory was *logically correct* in that it only provided a Saviour and an Holy Spirit for those only who were "fore-ordained to everlasting life." This is the key note of the Calvinistic idea.

There is another idea of election. It is this: That God did foresee the fall of man, by the introduction of sin. That man had exercised his own will in sinning. That God, out of His free love, offered His only Son as a propitiation for all those who had fallen in Adam, and that this sacrifice was one that could be accepted or rejected by every sane mind, leaving the will just as free to accept or reject as it was in the Garden of Eden. That God foresaw (or foreknew) that certain persons would accept the atonement offered by Christ and, on account of this foreseeing, he declared (or predestinated) them "unto everlasting life," and foreseeing that others, on account of their sins, would reject the offers of Christ as a Saviour, declared (or predestinated) them "unto everlasting death."

This latter theory maintains God's absolute sovereignty over mankind, and that his offering to save man from his sins was an act of "free grace and love," and also that God regards man as just as much of a free agent to-day, as when he was in the Garden of Eden.

As the object of this examination of the Westminster Confession is simply to show that its teachings and logical conclusions are repugnant to man's natural ideas of justice and right, we do not propose now to

offer any solution of the difficulties with which three hundred years of Calvinistic training have enslaved the human mind.

When we speak of man's "natural ideas of justice and right," have we any right to judge God's idea of justice and right by man's conception of the same? We answer by saying that man's idea of justice and right come to him alone from God's Holy Spirit, the results of his reasoning and the teachings of His Holy Word. Man does have an instinctive idea of what is just between man and man and he is naturally apt to expect the same kind of justice from God to those of his own creation. It must be a metaphysical question whether fallen man, blinded by sin, has any right to measure God's ideas of justice and right by his own feeble conception of the same. It is our contention that there is only a difference in *degree* between man's idea of love and God's idea.

Man, as a mere physical organism was no more wonderful than that of the fish or flower, far less stupendous than the mountains or the sea; yet he was considered as the crowning glory of God's creation. His pre-eminence is because he has been endowed with the power of thinking; the power of will; the power of choosing between what was good and what was bad. He had been endowed also with the power of "reasoning" with God—as Isaiah says. And his human sympathies are along the same line, for the Psalmist makes the pity which the human father giveth his children, the same as that which God giveth to those that fear him.

All of this proves that in the wonderful scheme of man's redemption, man's will was not to be entirely

ignored. God never coerced any man's will.

Without giving any biblical reason—without quoting any of the enigmatical texts which seem to teach a different doctrine, the sensible, well-poised, thinking man feels at a loss how to reconcile God's love to all mankind with His decree "of everlasting death" to many of mankind, without regard to their moral acts or sins, simply as an arbitrary act of His power.

Chapter III., Section 3, of Confession: "*By the decree of God, for the manifestation of His Glory, some men and angels are predestinated unto everlasting life and others foreordained to everlasting death.*"

This clearly teaches that God selected out of all mankind certain persons to be saved and certain persons to be lost, and that this decree was made before they were born, or sin had entered into the world, or Christ had been offered as an atonement for the sins of mankind. This decree, Section 3, was so positive that the number is so certain and definite that it can not be either increased or diminished. This can only mean that the decree was absolute and unconditional.

Now Section 5 of Chapter III gives us the reasons which moved God in making this decree, for it says it was "out of his mere free grace and love, without any foresight of faith or good works, or perseverance in either of them or any other thing in the creature (man) as conditions or causes moving him thereunto, and all to the praise of his glorious grace." This section shows that moral action on the part of man—the fact that he would or would not accept Christ as his Savior, had nothing whatever to do in influencing God's action as to his salvation. It was done simply

to prove God's "sovereignty" over his creatures, and it was all done to exhibit or add to the "praise of his glorious grace."

From this section we learn that salvation or election to "everlasting life" was bestowed without regard to moral character or worth, simply to show God's "sovereignty and grace," and, in Section 7 we are taught that God was pleased "to pass by and to ordain" the "rest of mankind" to dishonor and wrath for their sin "to the praise of his glorious justice." The elect are saved without regard to their moral character or worth, and the "rest of mankind" are lost "for their sin." If moral acts or good deeds had nothing to do with the fate of those who were saved, how is it that the moral action of those who were finally lost is offered as a *reason* for their loss?

If it is true that man's moral character had nothing to do with his election to "everlasting life," is it not equally logical and just that his moral character should have nothing to do with his condemnation to "everlasting death?"

The Westminster Assembly, having laid down their theory of "unconditional election" to everlasting life, knew that, as a logical necessity, there must be an unconditional reprobation, to "everlasting death," but this idea of a just and loving Father condemning beforehand His own children to *everlasting death*, without first giving him a chance—without any regard as to whether they would accept or reject Christ, was repugnant to their sense of justice, and in order to take the odium from our Heavenly Father of having consigned "the rest of mankind" to everlasting punishment, simply to show His Sovereignty, or to the

"praise of His glorious justice," fell back on a theory entirely inconsistent with their creed, and that was they were "passed by" for "their sin."

Here we see that a large multitude were saved without regard to their faith, and we see an entirely different rule is applied to those who are lost, for they were lost because of "their sin."

The saved are saved without regard to a moral act, good or bad, and the lost are lost because of a moral act, that is, because of "their sin."

The whole theory of the Westminster Confession is that man's salvation is not based on any moral act of the individual, but simply on God's decree of "election," and as the decree of reprobation is just as absolute as his decree of election, then it is without any regard to man's moral acts, and as Section 7 lays all the blame of man's final loss to "his sins," thus it shows that it has shifted its position from that of God's "decree" to some act, viz., "man's sin," for his ultimate loss.

We ask in all candor if it is right to damn one man for his sins, and to save another without regard to whether he has sinned or not? This is the logical conclusion from the Westminster idea of election.

Another very natural query comes up to the untheological mind and it is this: If all mankind were God's children and he loved all alike, how it was to "the praise of his glorious grace" that he selected some to everlasting life, and how it was to the praise of his "glorious justice" to ordain others to everlasting death. Which shows his glorious "grace or justice," the *saving* of some, or the *damning* of others?

Section 7 teaches us that God was pleased—that is,

it made him happy "to pass by" the rest of mankind and "to ordain them to dishonor and wrath for their sin." Yet God says, "Have I any pleasure at all that the wicked should die"? "I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked." "As I live, saith the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live."

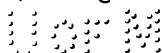
In this section VII, the Westminster Assembly was not willing that God should simply "pass by" those whom he had failed to *elect*, but that he should show a *mental recognition* of them by ordaining them "to dishonor and wrath." There was just as much of a mental act on the part of God in rejecting those whom he ordained to everlasting death, as to those whom he would save. This makes the decree of reprobation just as much of a mental act on the part of God as the decree of election.

We now come to Chapter X of the Confession, which we would not discuss if it was not a necessary outgrowth of Chapter III.

This chapter states that those who are "predestinated unto life," are called by "His Word and Spirit." This is clear and logical and is thoroughly Calvinistic.

Section 3, Chapter X., says: "Elect infants, dying in infancy, are regenerated and saved by Christ, through the Spirit, who worketh when and where and how he pleaseth."

If the Calvinistic idea of election is correct, that infants are saved by their "election," why is it necessary that another and *different means* of salvation should be provided for them? viz., through "the



Spirit, who worketh when and where and how he pleaseth." Was not the election "before the foundation of the world" sufficient to save all such infants?

The whole question of the salvation of the heathen is involved in this chapter. The Revision having abandoned the salvation of infants on the ground of "election," and saved them by the "operations of the Holy Spirit," without any reference to the decrees of election, offers the same terms to all the other elect "who are incapable of being outwardly called by the ministry of the world." This gives salvation to all the heathen, but on the ground that his situation has been such that he is incapable of being called by the Word, thus shifting his salvation from "election" to the fact that he had never heard of the "Word of God."

Whether it is better for the heathen that his salvation should depend on his "Election" to eternal life, before the foundation of the world was laid, or, to the fact that "he was incapable of being called by the Word "because he had never heard the Gospel preached," is a matter we will not discuss.

The Revisionist, in his effort to relieve the Confession of the odium of damning "non-elect" infants, proposes as a substitute for "Elect Infants:" "*All* infants dying in infancy." This was a surrender of the whole question of election. The Calvinist was, by the terms of election, logically a believer in infants being saved, alone, from the fact that they were among those whom God had elected unto "everlasting life," but the Revisionist, to shield himself from this theory, proclaims the salvation of "all infants" on the ground that they are regenerated by "God's Holy Spirit," which worketh when and where and how He pleaseth."



It the Westminster theory of election is correct and scriptural, then the corollary of non-elect infants and the reprobation of the non-elect, follows as a necessary consequence, as surely as the flower grows out of the bud and the fruit out of the flower. If God selected certain persons for salvation, without regard to their moral worth and before the foundations of the world were laid," then His selection was made of *souls* and had no reference whatever as to whether they were *infants* or *adults*; and, if this is true, it was just as consistent to damn an infant as an adult, as the moral acts or perceptions of neither were taken into consideration in deciding their destiny.

Elect Infants. Chapter X., Section 3, says: Elect infants dying in infancy are regenerated and saved by Christ through the Spirit. So also are all who are incapable of being outwardly called by the ministry of the Word."

This teaches us that the decree of infant's salvation depends on its dying in infancy, and the fact of this contingency makes it certain that the decree of its salvation is *conditional* and not *absolute*.

"So also are all who are incapable of being outwardly called by the ministry of the Word."

This opens the way to everlasting life of all the heathen who have never heard the Gospel, but we ask in all sincerity if it does not put them on a different plan of salvation than they would be if their salvation depended on their election to everlasting life by a decree, before "the foundation of the world?"

We have said that the Reyisionists have chosen to save the heathen by other means than that of "Election." We wish not only to be fair, but true

in our logic. We ask why "Infants dying in infancy are regenerated by the Spirit?" Is it not because of their mental incapacity to become "actual transgressors?" Are not the heathen who have never heard of God, of Christ and His Holy Word, just as free from moral guilt as the infant? What is sin? A violation of God's law. Then, where there is no law, there is no sin. We would quote Scripture right here, but this is a common-sense view of the Confession.

The Revisionists, in their proposed substitute for Section 3, Chapter X., classify "Infants" and "all other persons not actually guilty of transgression" as "included in the election of grace," and "saved by Christ through the Spirit." Is it not safe to say that the heathen has a better chance under the proposed revision than under our present confession? We ask in all candor if "all persons not actually guilty of transgression" are redeemed by the Spirit, without any regard to their "election," does this not necessarily include the heathen?

We have a profound admiration for those non-revisionists who thoroughly believe in Calvin's idea of election,—who reject with emphasis all propositions to modify the section referring to "Elect Infants" and to "Reprobation." They show a disposition to stand by the logical conclusions of their premises. But the question recurs, are the premises correct?

If the premises are correct, it was logical and proper that God should give, as the Confession says in Chapter VIII., Section 3, "unto all of those that are ordained unto life, his Holy Spirit to make them willing and able to believe."

As a necessary deduction he did not make any effort

to make those not already "ordained unto eternal life," willing and able to believe. *As no one ever comes to Christ, except as he is drawn by the Holy Spirit, and as the Holy Spirit, according to the Westminster, only operates on those "ordained to eternal life," then it follows that the multitude who are "passed by" have no possible hope of salvation, and no interest in the atonement which Christ made for mankind.*

It may be said that this review only touches the human side of this controversy. That God has a part in it all and that his declarations in scripture should have more weight and authority than any mere human judgments. To this, we say "Amen." Let God be true if it makes every man a liar. But the question is continually thrusting itself on the ordinary mind, it is necessary, in order to prove God's sovereignty," that we must sacrifice our ideas of His justice?

To all ordinary minds—to all untrained in theological analysis, there is a well-settled belief that the Westminster Confession teaches; that God, "before the foundations of the world were laid," by a fixed decree, ordained the salvation of certain persons called the "elect," and that by a decree just as fixed, "ordained to everlasting wrath" other persons, and that the destinies of those two classes cannot be changed by any human acts.

This we assert with sorrowful regret, is the Confessional idea of the Presbyterian Church. Yet we rejoice that in a long life-time we have never heard this doctrine of the Confession preached from the pulpit.

If the decrees of God as set forth in Chapter III, have proven to be a stumbling block to the ordinary

mind for more than two hundred and fifty years, is it not fair that we ask that we be allowed to fall back on what the Bible says on those subjects, rather than what the men of the sixteenth century said ?

The Presbyterian Church, entrenched behind her learning and scholarship—behind her ideas of representative government—and more than all, by her sanctified ministry and membership, has come to the front among the churches of to-day. Yet we cannot help feeling how much greater would have been her success had she long ago discarded the idea that man's fate was settled before he was born, by a decree as immovable as the heavens.

It is a very consoling idea to the "elect" to feel that the "everlasting arms" are underneath them, but how is it with those that have been "passed by," when the moral acts of both are the same ? We stand by the Scriptures and when a fair interpretation of any scripture proves to us that God, without regard to moral acts in the individual, selected some to everlasting life, and others to everlasting wrath, then we yield ourselves to our happy or disastrous fate regardless of our human beliefs.

In the Future. In the future there will come a time when a revision will be ordered to make the Westminster Confession coincide with the teachings of Christ; when this is done and intelligent Presbyterians are liberated from the thralldom of Calvin, then there will be a revision having only one idea, and that is, to make the Confession scriptural in all its teachings.

No Church has ever been able to invest its creed with such an air of sanctity as the Presbyterian. There has always been an unwritten law "that who-

soever toucheth the mount (the creed) shall surely be put to death." Environed as it has been by the thunders and lightnings of a Church's wrath, few have dared dissent from any of its teachings. This spirit was shown by the way in which many good people held up their hands in a deprecatory way, when the question of revision of the creed was first suggested to the Church.

The views expressed above are the result of many years of serious thought. They may be considered heretical, but as they are only presented as a "Common Sense view of the Confession," they do not involve the construction of any scripture relating to the subject. What was considered as heretical in science in the time of Galileo, is the acknowledged fact of to-day. The *Ultima Thule* of geographic discovery of the 14th century is silenced forever by the discovery of the Americas. So long as we stand by the revelation of God, as set forth in his Word, as "a rule of faith," we cannot be intentional heretics. There is a higher power than the dictum of the Church, and that is—the Holy Scriptures.

At the expense of being a little prolix, we cannot close our Common-Sense View of the Westminster Confession without referring to the great work of Dr. Archibald Hodge, styled, a "Commentary on the Confession of Faith." Dr. Hodge is certainly high authority in the Presbyterian Church, and Calvin was the Gamaliel at whose feet he sat. It may elicit thought and perhaps investigation by comparing some of our conclusions with those of Dr. Hodge.

We declare that the Confession teaches that God selected out of all mankind, certain persons, called the

"elect," to be saved, and that Christ died only for the elect.

Dr. Hodge, page 101 says: "The decree of God determines that out of the mass of fallen humanity, *certain* individuals shall attain to salvation," and that this decree is "unchangeable" and is not conditioned upon "foreseen faith, or good works, or perseverance," but God's "sovereign grace."

We say that the Confession teaches that Christ died *only* for the "elect."

Dr. Hodge, page 213, says: "Christ died for the purpose of saving no other than elect," and on page 215 he says, "Christ died with the purpose of executing the decree of election," and that his design in making the atonement "was definite—having respect to *certain definite persons*—the elect and none others." Still, while Christ died only for "certain definite persons," as the Confession teaches, yet, Dr. Hodge, on page 214, says: "The satisfaction rendered by Christ is amply sufficient for *all* men who can possibly be created."

How can the "satisfaction rendered by Christ" be sufficient for all men, if the Holy Spirit only calls those for whom Christ died? and that its operations "cannot be supplied to any who are not to be saved?" (Page 234.)

Dr. Hodge declares, page 234, "the Holy Spirit is the sole agent in effectual calling."

Dr. Hodge, on page 105, says: "The Confession affirms, first, that Christ was eternally appointed to make atonement as a means of executing the purpose to save the "elect;" and second, negatively that He has made atonement for none others."

We ask in all good conscience, how is it possible for a man to be saved, if Christ has made no atonement for him? These high Calvinistic views may be very fine as mere intellectual or metaphysical speculations, but how is it with the poor sinner, who has had no special evidence that he had been selected as one of the "elect?" The theologians feel naturally very secure, because they feel that they are among the elect, but how is it with the great millions who have no hope, except in the fact that Christ died to save all mankind who would trust in Him?

Dr. Hodge substantiates his fine-spun theories with a great many strong texts of Scripture. In giving a common-sense view of what the Confession teaches, we have not treated it from a biblical standpoint, but from the standpoint of common, ordinary men, entirely untrained in the *argumentum theologicum*.

It does seem to us that after admitting that God deliberately selected certain persons to be saved, regardless of their sins, and certain persons to be lost, because of their sins, that it is somewhat of a mockery to try to establish man's free agency.

Man's free agency in this matter, if the decree was "unchangeable," is like the free agency of the interior wheel of a watch, free to make its predestined revolutions, but controlled and regulated by greater wheels, ordering and controlling it to a certain end; or we might more aptly say, the freedom of a fish dropped into a vast sewer pipe whose end was in the deep ocean: free to swim on either side or in the middle of the pipe, but driven by the inevitable law of gravitation to its destined end in the ocean. Such we consider the moral freedom of those for whom Christ

did not die, and on whom the Holy Spirit does not operate.

In thus writing, we feel that we have almost, unchurched ourselves with all the High Calvinistic thinkers, yet standing by the Scriptures as our guide, we feel perfectly safe in the hands of an enlightened, educated, moral sentiment.

The Presbyterian Churches in the United States now number more than a million and a quarter of adherents, not because it has preached the doctrines of its Confession, but because it has dared to break the shackles of its creed, and offered the Gospel to all mankind, regardless of whether they were among the "elect" or the "passed by."

If the doctrines taught in our Confession are true and scriptural, they should be preached from our pulpits. If God, before the foundation of the world was laid, selected a certain definite number of persons to be saved, without any "foresight of faith," and by a decree just as absolute "passed by" the "rest of mankind," and then "ordained them to dishonor and wrath," why is it that Presbyterian ministers will not announce this wonderful truth to their congregations? The only answer is, that they either have not the courage of their convictions, or that they do not believe the doctrines of the Confession. The time has passed when the pulpit thinks for the pew.

In Section 5, Chapter III., of the Confession, we are told that the "Elect" were elected "without any foresight of faith, or good works, or perseverance in either of them."

This leads up to the great question, *Has character anything to do with our future destiny?* Did God, in

selecting His agents to carry out His designs in man's salvation, pay no attention to the fitness of those selected for the duties required of them? Was Moses selected to lead the children of Israel out of the wilderness, without any regard to his special qualifications for this special duty? Why was Paul selected as the great apostle of the Gentiles? Was it not because he was versed in the Hebrew, Greek and Latin languages and was familiar with the religious customs of surrounding nations, and that, though a Hebrew, he was a Roman citizen?

Did not the fact of his great learning, his matchless powers of logic and oratory and the further fact of his former zeal in enforcing the teachings of Judaism, make him necessarily the choice of Heaven as the propagator and defender of the Gospel of Christ? Did these long years of training weigh nothing in his selection? Or was he simply selected out of the great multitude to show God's right to do as he pleaseth with the creatures of his hand? A dozen Scriptural illustrations might here be brought forward to prove that God does look to the fitness of those whom he selects as his agents. But we are not discussing this question from a Scriptural standpoint. Man has been endowed with power to "reason" with God. How does he act in selecting agents to do his will? The Czar of Russia is absolutely sovereign in his realm. He can send a Siberian convict as his minister to the Court of St. James or the United States. But does he do it? Must he do it in order to impress the nations of the earth with great ideas as to his sovereignty? Is he not influenced to some extent by the special qualifications of his agents? Does a church call a

pastor without first investigating carefully what the man is,—his ability in the pulpit,—his past success as a pastor,—his character as a builder? How long would a church session be tolerated who would select a pastor by its own decree, without any regard to his adaptation for the place? Does not the fitness of any applicant for membership in the Presbyterian Church decide whether he shall be received or not?

There must be some analogy between God's methods and those of man.

What we have written *is written*. We have spoken what we regard is the truth—and though our ecclesiastical position (that of an elder) may be endangered by these views, yet we had rather be *right* than be an elder in any Church. We have not attacked the theological bulworks of the Presbyterian Church—they may be fortified by impregnable scriptural authority—we are only giving what the ordinary, common sense man gleans from the Confession. If our Confession presents itself to the ordinary man, whom we hope to save and bring into the Presbyterian Church, as it does to us, we ask "Is not some kind of revision necessary?"

These views are not put forth as the views of the Presbyterian Church, nor of Immanuel Church, of which the author is a member.

If they express theological treason, then the author alone is responsible.

